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## **FINDING AND RECOMMENDATION(S)**

### **AS REVISED 2-14-08**

**Submitted by: Bud Hicks**

#### **Finding:**

Forest thinning and the institution of healthy forest management and maintenance practices are essential to restoring health to Lake Tahoe's forests in order to protect against the hazards of catastrophic fires. Short-term solutions, coupled with long-term programs, must be accepted and implemented without delay in order to prevent long-term devastating impacts on the Lake and its residents that catastrophic wild fires would create.

**[Approved and adopted by Wildland Fuels Committee]**

#### **Background and Supporting Evidence:**

The forests within the Tahoe Basin are substantially different today than the forests that existed in the Basin prior to European/American settlement (prior to 1870). Prior to European/American settlement, low intensity fires burned every 5 to 18 years in the lower elevation pine and mixed conifer forests of the Basin, resulting in a forest consisting of widely-spaced conifer trees with a poorly developed shrub understory.

Between 1875 and 1895, large scale timber harvesting, including clear-cutting of many Basin forest areas, removed most of the widely-spaced trees around the Lake. Although forest stands successfully regenerated, the past 50 years of fire suppression and a reduced emphasis on forest management on public lands within the Basin has resulted in much denser forests (up to 4 times the pre-1870 density in lower elevation forests and twice the density in higher elevation forests); and abnormally increased build-up of fuels within the forests and resultant increased risks from fire.

Further adding to the severe fire hazards within the forests of the Tahoe Basin are the following circumstances resulting from the increased density of the forests:

- (a) Current forest stands exhibit a 70% higher disease incidence and a 5% greater mortality than remnant old growth stands in the Basin;
- (b) High rates of tree mortality, particularly white fir, have greatly increased the number of standing dead trees and downed logs;
- (c) Smaller, mid-story trees create fuel ladders that allow fires to readily move into dense crowns;
- (d) The lack of frequent low density fires has resulted in accumulations of dead fuels, increased understory shrubs, and dense young trees. As a result, flame lengths and rates of fire spread lead to higher intensity fires, leading to a greatly elevated risk of crown fires throughout the Basin.

When the TRPA was created, the prevention of catastrophic fire to the Tahoe Basin was not considered or addressed. Since then, forest fuels build up has occurred as the result of unintended consequences of regulatory efforts to curb erosion by making the removal of forest fuels difficult, if not impossible, to undertake, and by the efficiency of federal and local fire prevention efforts to eliminate fires within the Tahoe Basin. Due to a number of conditions, including insect infestations and drought, circumstances have changed since the TRPA was created and now the threat of massive, catastrophic fires poses risks to public safety, property, and the environment of the Tahoe Basin never imagined by the creators of the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact.

Recognizing these changed circumstances, the TRPA Governing Board, beginning in 2002, adopted various resolutions making the avoidance of catastrophic fires within the Basin the number 1 priority of the TRPA. More recently, since the Angora fire, the TRPA has created "Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Committee." These efforts are to be applauded. However, there continues to be a need for the TRPA, as the only regulatory agency having jurisdiction over all parts of the Tahoe Basin, to exercise leadership in addressing the hazards of catastrophic fire to the environment as well as to public safety, by assisting all property owners, land managers, agencies, and governmental authorities in the Basin as they try to implement sound practices to eliminate or avoid, to the extent possible, the risks of catastrophic fire.

## **Recommendation(s)**

1. The forests of the Basin are natural resources that should be preserved and managed in order to insure forest health and to reduce the risks of catastrophic fires. **[ Approved and adopted by Wildland Fuels Committee ]**

2. The TRPA should continue to make the avoidance of catastrophic fire its number one priority and should be aggressive in facilitating fuel reduction projects within the forests of the Tahoe Basin's forests and in approving and permitting projects by the Basin's land managers and property owners to remove fuels from the forests within the Basin and to implement forest restoration plans.

3. Article V, Section (c)(3) requires the TRPA to adopt a conservation plan for the preservation, development, utilization, and management of the scenic and other natural resources within the Tahoe Basin. The TRPA reports that it has adopted such a plan. The Governing Board of the TRPA should take aggressive steps to assure that cost effective vegetation treatments including, where appropriate, forest thinning, removal of forest fuels, construction of access roads for the purpose of allowing emergency vehicles and fire fighting equipment access to the forest area, and other reasonable methods of forest preservation, are permitted to be undertaken by the Basin's land managers and property owners with a minimum of regulatory impediments or delays.

**Impacts of Implementation:** *(The implementation of any Recommendation is likely to have specific impacts. Consider potential consequences related to each of the following areas):*

Analysis of impacts on the following factors is REQUIRED (Best Estimate):

- ☐ Cost / There are no apparent costs to this action.
- ☐ Funding source / not applicable
- ☐ Staffing / Can be handled by current staff
- ☐ Existing regulations and/or laws / does not require any changes to existing law or regulations

Analysis of impacts on the following factors is OPTIONAL:

- ☐ Operational
- ☐ Social
- ☐ Political
- ☐ Policy
- ☐ Health and Safety
- ☐ Environmental
- ☐ Interagency

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